

Posted on Wed, Jan. 17, 2007

California freeze raises citrus prices

California's citrus crop has been devastated by recent freezes.

By Olivia Munoz

Associated Press

FRESNO, Calif. - Shoppers will feel the sting from a string of subfreezing nights in California's citrus groves and other farming areas, with prices for oranges, lemons, avocados and other produce poised to double or triple in coming weeks, according to industry officials.

"We may adjust the prices as we discover the full extent of the damage next week, but for now, if you bought an orange at the supermarket for 50 cents, expect to pay a dollar to \$1.49 for it," said Todd Steel, owner of Royal Vista Marketing, which sells California citrus to markets throughout the country.

With the NFL playoffs in full swing, some fans may choose to go without traditional favorites.

"Avocados are expensive enough as it is," said Joseph Vasquez, a 32-year-old school teacher from Pasadena. "We may have to do without guacamole for a while. And we may be drinking our Coronas without limes."

Nearly every winter crop is affected by the freeze, from avocados to strawberries to fresh-cut flowers, but it's the state's citrus crop that stands to take the biggest economic hit. California is the nation's No. 1 producer of fresh citrus, growing about 86 percent of lemons and 21 percent of oranges sold in the United States, according to the California Farm Bureau. Florida produces more oranges, but those are mostly processed for orange juice.

More than 70 percent of this season's oranges, lemons and tangerines -- nearly \$1 billion worth of fruit -- were still on the trees as nighttime temperatures in California's Central Valley dipped into the low 20s and teens on four straight nights beginning Friday. The freeze ruined as much as three-quarters of the California citrus crop, growers say; the fruit is threatened whenever the mercury falls below 28 degrees.

"Limited amounts were harvested before the freeze, so it's not like the markets are going to dry up suddenly," said Claire Smith, a spokeswoman for Sunkist Growers, a Los Angeles-based cooperative owned by some 6,000 growers in California and Arizona.

Still, the diminished supply is bound to drive up prices, Smith said. Sunkist may import oranges and other fruit from South Africa and other countries.

On Tuesday, a Visalia-based citrus broker was selling 40-pound boxes of oranges for \$22 to \$32, depending on the variety. That's up from \$6 to \$14 a week earlier, and with the National Weather Service calling for at least one more night of frigid temperatures in many areas, prices could continue to escalate.

Some shoppers took advantage of still-reasonable prices Tuesday, as many of the fruit on market shelves was picked before the freeze. Shopper Lindsay Beamish, 29, was surprised to see a 10-pound bag of oranges selling for \$10 at a Vons supermarket in Pasadena.

"I might just have to get 10 pounds worth because that's not going to last," she said of the price.

Labor leaders estimate as many as 12,000 field workers and packing house employees could lose their jobs for the remainder of the season.

Damaged fruit from the current freeze may still be salvaged as juice, usually a byproduct for California farmers, Smith said.